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Film Criticism Final Paper

Flirting With Empowerment:
Quentin Tarantino's Troubling Depictions of Sexual Assault

Quentin Tarantino, auteur director of such hyper-violent, exploitation-inspired films as *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), and *Django Unchained* (2012), has become one of those male filmmakers whose personal lives and filmographies have— deservingly— come under scrutiny in recent years in light of the #MeToo movement and its accompanying social focus on the way women are treated both on and off screen. Like Woody Allen, Tarantino has come to be associated with sexism and controversy, particularly following Uma Thurman's public revelations about his manipulative and dangerously irresponsible treatment of her on the set of *Kill Bill* which led to her being seriously injured and then, in her words, treated as a "broken tool" as opposed to a creative contributor to the production. This complaint, coupled with his history of performing his most degrading stunts himself— from choking Diane Kruger to spitting in Uma Thurman's face— already makes for a strong case for the sexism of his films. That being said, while many criticisms have been leveled at his films' treatment of women and how that reflects on him as a director (and as a person), he has also created a number of fantastically dynamic and iconic female characters from Mia Wallace to Jackie Brown. His depictions of women are, for this reason, in truth much more complex than they're often made out to be. There is, however, one particularly troubling and consistent element of his filmmaking connected to these same issues that has gone noticeably unaddressed: his graphic depictions of sexual assault and the way they reflect both internalized homophobia and a disregard for women's suffering. Tarantino's uses of male homosexual rape as the ultimate form of victimization, in contrast to his

deployment of female heterosexual rape— which is largely treated as a drama-enhancing tool rather than a central plot point— is reflective of a prioritization on his part of manhood and traditional masculinity over women's trauma as a result of sexual assault.

Even in spite of all of their obvious flaws, I count many of Tarantino's films as favorites, *Pulp Fiction* (1996) and *Kill Bill* to name a couple. I enjoy their flamboyant grindhouse aesthetics, quick dialogue, and dark senses of humor, and have watched most of his films more than once (or twice, or three times). Characters like Jackie Brown and Shosanna Dreyfus (*Inglourious Basterds*) are to me fantastic examples of on-screen female representation. For me, in light of this, most of the films' sexism is easy to overlook given the pulpy packaging, the cartoonishness of the violence in question— it's hard to take any death seriously when it involves a comedic, 4-foot-tall geyser of blood— and the fact that his primary female characters are actually highly empowered. Yet, in both *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, there is at least one moment (two in the latter film) that I consistently dread watching and, at this point years after first seeing both films, skip. All of them are rapes. The profound difference between them, though, one which significantly worsens their gruesomeness, is the victim's gender. The rape in *Pulp Fiction* is treated much more seriously than are the rapes in *Kill Bill*, focusing on the pain it causes the character and the way in which it changes the reality of the story.

Pulp Fiction, Tarantino's breakout film, nonlinearly follows a large array of characters over the course of one day as their lives intersect in different ways. One of those characters is Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), a gangster through whom most of the characters are related— they either work for him, are married to him, are his friends, or are his enemies. About two thirds of the way through the film, Butch (Bruce Willis), a boxer who refuses to take a bribe

and intentionally lose a match for Marcellus, is about to successfully escape the city before Marcellus has him killed when they unexpectedly run into each other on the street. This leads to a chase sequence which ends in a gunshop wherein the owner attacks both men, knocking them unconscious with a shotgun, before tying them up in his basement and bringing in his accomplice, Zed. The next several minutes are incredibly effective on cinematic terms, ramping up tension as the two men sit helpless while their assailents leisurely select who they will violate first through a game of eeny meeny miny moe, ultimately dragging Marcellus to another room and leaving Butch alone, crying in pain and fear, as a third man ("the gimp") who they keep locked in a cage in the basement, watches him while tied to a rope dangerously close to an arm's length away. Butch succeeds in escaping from his bonds and almost leaves Marcellus, only to change his mind and search for a weapon— notably, his selections escalate in size and phallic symbolism from a hammer to a baseball bat until he settles on a long katana which he weilds at waist height. He then enters the room where Marcellus is being assaulted and slashes the shop owner, who is masturbating to the attack, before holding Zed at swordpoint until Marcellus picks up the shop owner's long shotgun and shoots Zed in the crotch.

This sequence, for obvious reasons, is genuinely horrific to watch. While most of Tarantino's garish violence comes much closer to cartoon than reality, this scene is much more realistic than many of his fight scenes. Although the circumstances are contrived and there are some stylistic flourishes (a moment in slow motion, one quick pan), the shooting style emphasizes Butch and Marcellus' subjective emotional realities as well as the dingy realism of the basement itself— no blood spatters here. Marcellus is treated with empathy in the moment of his assault (Butch feels compelled to save him even though in the previous scene they had been

trying to kill each other) and he is even given a moment to acknowledge the pain he has been caused in an extended monologue directly addressed to his rapist and witnessed by Butch. The moment is reclamatory and redemptive, particularly in parallel with the two men's re-gaining of the phallically coded power of the attackers' weapons, particularly Marcellus's use of the owner's shotgun (which he used to knock them unconscious in the first place) to literally castrate his attacker, thus reinstating his role as a dominant masculine figure who dictates Butch's fate in the film rather than the other way around. This reassertion is further solidified by the choice to include Marcellus' monologue acknowledging his trauma, which notably includes him directly calling Zed a "piece of shit rapist." By asserting his power over Zed in this fashion, demonstrating his strength by describing how he will hire others to torture him on his behalf, Marcellus is clearly shown to be a dominant masculine figure. All of this in combination with the fact that this scene is the film's climax demonstrates the seriousness with which this attack is taken.

In *Kill Bill*, however, rape against women is not treated with the same seriousness. Beatrix Kiddo (Uma Thurman), the film's protagonist, is a woman solely driven by maternity. Her jealous ex-lover and former boss, Bill, who runs an assassin squad of which she was once a central part prior to her discovery that she is pregnant with his child, finds her at her wedding rehearsal; she plans to marry an innocuous man and settle down into her role as a devoted mother to her (and Bill's) baby. Bill shoots her in the face, sending her into a coma from which it is presumed she will never recover. The film, which is non-linear, soon introduces the image of Beatrix lying powerless in her comatose state in a vignette of another assassin attempting to poison her in her sleep before Bill calls her off. The next scene comes four years later, when a

mosquito biting her sends her screaming into wakefulness, seemingly at random. What follows is a deeply intimate and emotional moment, stylized though it may be, of Beatrix remembering Bill's attack before feeling her head for the bullet wound and, finally, reaching down to her flat stomach, resting her hands in the empty air over the place that used to be her pregnant stomach in the last moments she remembers. She lets out a howl of loss and, as the camera pushes in, moans over the loss of her child. This moment is genuine and serves as the turning point in which she resolves to begin her quest for revenge, the motivation which drives the next 3 plus hours of the two films. This pivotal moment is abrupty interrupted, however, when two men enter her hospital room and exchange cash for one of them to rape her while she is (presumed to be) unconscious. The conversation is crass and the man in charge, seemingly a nurse or orderly, is intimately familiar with the mechanics of this form of violation on her person, explaining that she's "a spitter" as a reflex and that "sometimes but not always this chick's cooch gets drier than a bucket of sand," while tossing the other man a jar of lube. This other man does not end up raping her, she bites off his lip when he climbs on top of her and manages to set a trap for the nurse, Buck (Michael Bowen), who, she remembers, has raped her regularly throughout her stay at the hospital. The men's conversation prior to Beatrix's retaliatory attack also suggest that countless other men have assaulted her with Buck's permission over the years— he has a fixed price and a set amount of time the man is allowed to spend in the room and has lube on hand— an unfathomably devastating revelation made worse by the inherent helplessness and uncertainty that comes with the fact that she was unconscious all the time it was occurring and can never know who or how many people have violated her.

Beatrix, like Marcellus, does take revenge on her attacker; that being said, this moment is less fleshed out and, more importantly, the scene itself is fundamentally gratuitous, adding nothing to her character. Beatrix was already awake when the scene took place, therefore it doesn't serve as a catalyst for the next phase of her story. In fact, this additional trauma actually distracts from the real emotional moment which drives her for the rest of the film and its sequel— her rage and devastation at the loss of her baby— literally shoehorning itself into the plot for no other reason than to add drama. The only narrative purpose this scene serves is to provide Beatrix with a vehicle with which to escape, a detail so simple it could readily have been overlooked (she could have stolen any car without having to murder a rapist to do so— she could have even called a cab). Additionally, it is explicitly clear that Beatrix has been through a countless number of rapes while in the hospital, all of which directly profit her primary assailant. While she is able to kill Buck, unlike Marcellus in the gunshop, she will never be able to fully resolve her traumas— never murder all the men who have raped her. Whereas Marcellus is allowed to, in his words, "go medieval on [Zed's] ass" with a shotgun, Beatrix is unable to even stand on her own due to her years of physical atrophy. She is forced to bring her rapist to the ground where she lies and drag herself across the floor to bash his head in with the doorframe, a moment imbued with much less dignity than Marcellus' extended monologue and which she is forced to go through alone, unseen and unvalidated. This scene has no impact on the rest of the story and is never addressed again by her or anyone else. In fact, beyond murdering Buck in the hospital, she seems unfazed by this occurrence, moving on to continue the emotional arc and revenge quest she began immediately prior to the attack in the hospital, a shocking fact given the immensity of the emotional circumstances established within the scene itself. In linear terms,

Marcellus' narrative in *Pulp Fiction* ends with his attack, which he acknowledges, leaves him "pretty fucking far from okay." It makes no sense logically, then, that this moment which takes place near the beginning of Beatrix's story would have no psychological consequences and indicates a disregard for her well-being as a character, particularly since she is the films' sole protagonist rather than a secondary character like Marcellus.

This use of homosexual male assault as the ultimate form of emasculation and heterosexual female assault as more common and less connected to identity and honor— thus making it less horriffic— could be viewed as reflective of societal structures which conflate masculinity with penetrative phallic power as opposed to a unique element of Tarantino's sensibility; that being said, emasculation and rape threats by men against men are pervasive in his filmography, beginning with his debut feature, *Reservoir Dogs,* and continuing to play a central part even in his second most recent film, *The Hateful Eight* (2015), demonstrating his discrete preoccupation with rigid and honor-based masculity as a theme. In *Reservoir Dogs*, a film with literally no female characters, talk of sexual violence and queerness is used as a means to threaten and disempower each other in situations ranging from major incidents to passing quips. Early on in the film, Steve Buschemi's character indignantly asks why he has to be named "Mr. Pink" as the group of hired criminals choose their code names only to be told by the boss, "it's because you're a f**ggot alright?" as the other characters chuckle and Mr. Pink grumbles that his name "sounds like Mr. Pussy." Later in the movie, Mr. Blonde and Nice Guy Eddie (Michael Madsen and Chris Penn) greet each other following a long stint in jail for Mr Blonde. They quickly get to insulting each other, a pissing match which devolves into physical aggression and homophobic taunting when Eddie accuses Blonde of having tried to rape him

during their play-scuffle. The exchange that follows homophobic, with Eddie telling Blonde, "You sick bastard. Now whatever you do in the privacy of your own home, that's your business, but don't try to fuck me." Blonde replies, "Listen, if I was a butt cowboy, I wouldn't even throw you to the posse… I might break you in, Nice Guy, but I'd make you my dog's bitch." Each interaction suggests that homosexuality is a form of debasement, with both men trying to take on the dominant position by either distancing himself from the act, Eddie suggesting that while Blonde is gay he is not, or sarcastically putting himself in the penetrative role and belittling the other man, Blonde suggesting that Eddie is so weak that he is lower and more powerless than even a primary submissive partner (penetration here being conflated with weakness) namely, the feminine-coded "my dog's bitch."

In *The Hateful Eight*, too, homosexual assault is used as profound debasement when Major Marquis Warren (Samuel L. Jackson) describes forcing a Confederate soldier, Chester (Craig Stark), to give him a blowjob before murdering him. The racial and political implications here too suggest that the act of rape in this case is a form of empowerment and domination— or, rather, disempowerment for another character, General Sanford Smithers (Bruce Dern), a virulently racist Confederate officer whose son Warren describes assaulting and killing. It is unclear within the scene itself whether Warren's story is true, but regardless, Tarantino's choice to depict a rape in this moment is indicative of his perceptions of what constitutes the worst form of debasement: homosexual assault. Warren goes on to describe holding Chester at gunpoint (another long shotgun, a phallic symbol like the katana Tarantino has repeated throughout his career) and forcing him to walk naked through the snow for two hours before making him perform fellatio on his knees for the promise of a blanket. This scene is exaggerated and

heightened by Warren's use of terms like "johnson" and "dingus" for his penis to goad Chester's father into reaching for a gun so Warren can shoot him. The assault is also shown, unlike Beatrix's, and the image is strikingly similar to Marcellus' rape in Pulp Fiction with Warren laughing and hooting as he assaults the man. This scene also serves as a central moment in the film (immediately before the intermission) which leads to the death of one of the main characters, the General, suggesting once more the seriousness with which Tarantino treats this form of assault.

It's also worth noting that both this scene and Marcellus' assault are racialized and feature Confederate imagery (the gun shop owner has a confederate flag on his wall and refers to Marcellus by the N-word or "boy" throughout the scene), adding to the gravity of the power dynamics at play. This racialized form of sexual violence is also featured in *Django Unchained* when Southern slavers are shown torturing Django (Jamie Foxx) while they prepare to castrate him, and mentioned in *Reservoir Dogs* when Nice Guy Eddie implies after his scuffle with Mr. Blonde that the latter man is now gay because he was raped by black men in prison. Thus, Tarantino perversely heightens the tensions of these scenes, adding to Marcellus' and Mr. Blonde's debasement and Warren's racial empowerment through noxious racism. This fits neatly into discussions of Tarantino's fraught relationship to blackness (his well-documented obsession with the N-word being a prime example), and, in fact, his use of sexual and racialized violence has been pointed out before, but even in this context the way these scenes address masculinity and homophobia has gone unaddressed.

Sexual violence against women is shown less often than against men, but still consistently treated with less seriousness. This form of threat appears once more in *Kill Bill Vol.*

1, as a part of the backstory of O-ren Ishii (Lucy Lui), the yakuza boss who Beatrix murders at the climax of the film. Like Beatrix's own rapes, it comes as a secondary form of trauma to the loss of a loved one, in this case O-ren's parents. The sequence is animated and depicts an eight-year-old O-ren watching from under a bed as her parents are both stabbed to death by a katana-wielding bodyguard of Yakuza boss Matsumoto while Matsumoto himself looks on and laughs while smoking a cigar. The sequence, narrated by Beatrix, continues with the line, "O-ren vowed to get her revenge that day. Luckily for her, Boss Matsumoto was a pedophile." This crudely phrased statement accompanies the next image, a slightly older O-ren sitting astride the nude boss with her long katana stuck deep into his chest and telling him she is taking her revenge for her parents before pulling out the sword to an absurdly enormous gush of blood reminiscent of an ejaculation. This, like Beatrix's rapes, is an unnecessary detail in terms of the plot of the film. O-ren could have easily killed him in another fashion, particularly given the fact that in the present timeline of the film she is an accomplished assassin and Yakuza boss herself. Additionally, while she is not shown being assaulted in the sequence, the question of whether she was during the three years between her parents' deaths and Matsumoto's own hangs unanswered in the air since she was presumably in the care of the mob for that interim, a detail made worse by the fact that Beatrix crassly describes her as "lucky" for having the opportunity to murder him due to his pedophilia. None of this is ever addressed explicitly in the rest of the film and no closure is provided; the gratuitous and abbreviated rape revenge plot is once more merely a vehicle for a familial revenge narrative. The way Tarantino shoots this scene also indicates the fact that he perceives a man being penetrated (by a woman or in general) as a humiliation,

focusing on the manner in which Matsumoto squirms under O-ren's sword and highlighting the ejaculative nature of his gush of blood with an elongated moan from the boss.

Similarly, later, when O-ren's bodyguard Gogo Yubari (Chiaki Kuriyama) is introduced, her "madness" is established in a flashback wherein she asks a man at a bar if he wants "to screw" her, and when he says yes, stabs him in the groin with a katana, saying, "How 'bout now, big boy? Do you still wish to penetrate me… or is it I who has penetrated you?" retracting the sword with another giant, gush of blood flowing from between his legs, connoting both menstruation and ejaculation. This moment highlights the same theme of sexual penetration as debasement, both in the man's death and in Gogo's distain for the thought of sex with him (although for her, this perception is interestingly framed as "madness") Passivity and penetration here are presented by Tarantino as debasement as in the homosexual rape scenes.

While moments like this are relatively few over the course of Tarantino's filmography, they reveal a pattern that seriously highlights an internalized homophobia and sexism on his part that shouldn't be ignored and which I personally find intensely troubling. So why is it then that his films are still incredibly popular, successful, and well-liked? The fact of the matter is, at least for me, in the context of films whose central female characters are so often highly empowered, some of his violence against women is much easier to overlook. The problem comes when he incorporates forms of brutal and traumatizing interpersonal violence like sexual assault without treating them with the full respect and gravity they deserve (in the case of his women) or interrogating the problematic political implications they inherently possess (in the case of his men). With this in mind, though, his relationship to gender, like his relationship with racial politics, is incredibly complicated and it would be a loss to disregard his films entirely because

of one element of them. Even within each scene of assault I've described, he does provide every character who is assaulted some sort of revenge with the goal of empowering them— it's simply not enough to outweigh the trauma he's put them through or the homophobic implications of the scenes themselves. That said, watching Beatrix Kiddo fight her way through a hundred men with a sword or outsmart someone trying to bury her alive is undeniably affirming. His movies are, simply put, *fun* for the most part beyond these scenes, and it's rare that any one scene can fully ruin the experience of watching something as a truly entertaining as *Pulp Fiction* or *Kill Bill*. This obviously doesn't mean that his sexism or internalized homophobia or dubious racial politics are to be forgiven, but it does explain why I still watch his films even though they occasionally make me uncomfortable. Critically engaging with a piece of media and interrogating its social and political implications doesn't inherently have to eliminate the pleasure of it as a whole, and can actually enhance the power of its more genuinely positive or empowering moments even as it clarifies the problems of its worse, more offensive ones.

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